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Running Head: Disapproval of Self-Superiority Claims

The Hubris Hypothesis: You Can Self-Enhance, but You'd Better not Show it

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Abstract

**Objective:** We tested whether and why observers dislike individuals who convey self-superiority through blatant social comparison (the *hubris hypothesis*).

**Method:** Participants read self-superiority claims ("I am better than others", Experiments 1-7), noncomparative positive claims ("I am good;" Experiments 1-2, 4), self-equality claims ("I am as good as others;" Experiments 3-4, 6), temporally comparative self-superiority claims ("I am better than I used to be;" Experiment 5), other-superiority claims ("S/he is better than others;" Experiment 6), and self-superiority claims accompanied by persistent disclaimers (Experiment 7). They judged the claim and the claimant (Experiments 1-7) and made inferences about the claimant's self-view and view of others (Experiments 4-7) as well as the claimant's probable view of them (Experiment 7).

**Results:** Self-superiority claims elicited unfavorable evaluations relative to all other claims. Evaluation unfavorability was accounted for by the perception that the claimant implied a negative view of others (Experiments 4-6) and particularly of the observer (Experiment 7). Supporting the hubris hypothesis, participants disliked individuals who communicated self-superiority beliefs in an explicitly comparative manner.

**Conclusions:** Self-superiority beliefs may provoke undesirable interpersonal consequences when they are explicitly communicated to others, but not when they are disguised as noncomparative positive self-claims or self-improvement claims.

**KEYWORDS:** self-enhancement, positive illusions, self-presentation, social comparison, superiority

Most people believe that they are somewhat superior to their doppelgänger. The nature, scope, and antecedents of self-superiority *beliefs* are well-documented (Alicke & Govorun, 2005; Dunning, 1993; Hoorens, 1993). However, little is known about the interpersonal consequences of self-superiority *claims*. We examine in this article how observers evaluate an individual's self-superiority claims, and why they evaluate them the way they do. These empirical forays are critical both for understanding the social consequences of self-superiority claims and for clarifying conflicting findings in the literature.

### **Self-Superiority Beliefs**

Most people regard their traits and abilities as superior to those of others. People think that their relationships are better (Buunk & Van den Eijnden, 1997), their future holds more promise (Hoorens, Smits, & Shepperd, 2008), their emotional life is more intense (Pronin, Fleming, & Steffel, 2008), and their personality is richer (Sande, Goethals, & Radloff, 1988) and progresses better than others' (Kanten & Teigen, 2008; Wilson & Ross, 2001).

Self-superiority beliefs are found in a multitude of domains and in demographic, representative, and cultural samples. They occur among drivers rating their driving skills (Waylen, Horswill, Alexander, & McKenna, 2004), major league soccer players appraising their athletic prowess (Van Yperen, 1992), married people assessing their relationship (Rusbult, Van Lange, Wildschut, Yovetich, & Verette, 2000), social psychologists judging the quality or ethicality of their research (Van Lange, 1999; Van Lange, Taris, & Vonk, 1997), rheumatoid arthritis patients rating the severity of their symptoms (DeVellis et al., 1990), and elderly persons believing they are less at risk for age-related problems than their peers (Schulz & Fritz, 1987). Self-superiority beliefs are prevalent in preschoolers (Weiner, 1964), elementary school students (Albery & Messer, 2005), high school students (Kurman,

2002), university students (Alicke, 1985; Brown, 1986), representative community samples (Heady & Wearing, 1988), and across cultures (Chiu, Wan, Cheng, Kim, & Yang, 2011).

### **The Hubris Hypothesis: Unfavorable Evaluations of Self-Superiority Claims**

The pervasiveness of self-superiority beliefs alone makes it virtually inevitable that they will slip into narrative self-descriptions. People may express such beliefs as blatant self-superiority claims (“I am better at tennis than many others”). Here, one conveys superiority in direct comparison to others. Alternatively, people may express self-superiority beliefs indirectly (“I am good at tennis”). Here, one conveys superiority in a rather noncomparative (or, to be exact, implicitly comparative; Alicke, 2007) manner. We propose that observers dislike self-superiority claims relative to noncomparative claims (and assorted other claims—see below) and in an absolute sense. We label this formulation the *hubris hypothesis*.

Why are self-superiority claims offensive? We assess three reasons. First, such claims may violate societal norms against social comparison (*disapproval of social comparison*). If so, people should dislike any blatantly comparative claim about the self, regardless of whether this claim implies superiority or equality (“I am as good at tennis as many other people are”). Second, self-superiority claims may convey an extremely positive self-view (*positivity of self-view*). If so, people should infer a more positive self-view from self-superiority claims than from indirect expressions of self-superiority beliefs, and these inferences should predict the rejection of self-superiority claims. Finally, self-superiority claims may communicate a negative view of others, including the observer (*negativity of other-view, negativity of observer-view*). If so, people should infer a more negative view of others (including the observer) from self-superiority claims than indirect expressions of self-superiority beliefs, and these inferences should predict the rejection of self-superiority claims.

The *negativity of other-view/negativity of observer-view* reason does not merely imply a dislike of claims that communicate a negative view of others and the observer. People loathe individuals who look down on others (Hoorens, 2011; Sedikides, Gregg, & Hart, 2007). Rather, this reason states that an observer infers a negative view *of others* from a claim *about the claimant* and that this inference, more than any inference about the self-view of the claimant, drives the evaluation of the claim and the claimant. Somewhat ironically, then, inferred views of *others* would determine how people evaluate one's claims about oneself.

We wish to highlight further the specificity of the hubris hypothesis. The hypothesis stipulates that the superiority claim refer to the self (vs. others) and to social (vs. temporal) comparison. It asserts that the manner in which a superiority belief is *expressed* crucially determines how observers will evaluate the claim and the claimant, thus predicting unfavorable evaluations of *particular* self-superiority claims. In all, the hypothesis focuses not just on whether observers dislike self-superiority claims but mostly on *why* they do so.

Although there is a sizeable literature on perceptions of modesty and self-enhancement (Hoorens, 2011; Leary, Bednarski, Hammon, & Duncan, 1997; Sedikides et al., 2007), only a handful of studies are directly relevant to the hubris hypothesis, and these studies have produced conflicting results. A subset of them suggests that people like self-superiority claims. Participants judge as more intelligent an individual who claims an above (rather than below) average problem-solving ability (Vonk, 1999), and judge as more competent and likeable an individual who expects to perform above average (rather than average or below average) on an exam or at a tennis tournament (Schlenker & Leary, 1982). Another subset suggests that people dislike self-superiority claims. Participants evaluate more favorably balanced or modest than self-enhancing self-presentations (Robinson, Johnson, & Shields, 1995), and participants who know that an individual's competence on a given ability

dimension would not be objectively tested evaluate unfavorably the individual's self-superiority claim on that dimension (Bond et al., 2000; Vonk, 1999). A third subset suggests that people consider self-superiority claims nondiagnostic or evaluatively uninformative. Participants' evaluations of others' expectancy of a better-than-average future (comparative optimism) are neutral relative to their unfavorable evaluations of others' expectancy of a worse-than-average future (comparative pessimism) (Helweg-Larsen, Sadeghian, & Webb, 2002; LeBarbenchon, Milhabet, Steiner, & Priolo, 2008). To our knowledge, no research (a) has directly pitted self-superiority claims against noncomparative positive claims (and other types of positive claims), (b) has explored whether observers dislike self-superiority claims in an absolute sense, and (c) has examined why observers dislike self-superiority claims. Taken together, these practices constitute the acid test of the hubris hypothesis.

### Overview

Do self-superiority claims engender more unfavorable evaluations than noncomparative positive claims, as the hubris hypothesis posits? And if so, why? We addressed these (and related) questions in seven experiments.

In all experiments, we pitted participants' evaluations of self-superiority claims against their evaluations of other positive self-claims. We focused on claims about social roles, thus building on the literature that demonstrates self-enhancement on roles (e.g., relationships, duties) and socially relevant characteristics (Alicke & Sedikides, 2009; Sedikides & Gregg, 2003). Furthermore, we selected "friend" as the role of primary interest (Experiments 1-7). People have a broad latitude for making self-superiority claims in the friendship domain. The claim of being "a good friend" is difficult to verify, thus allowing for "wiggle room" in the dimensions included, in the relative weighting of these dimensions, and in the ensuing judgment (Allison, Messick, & Goethals, 1989; Dunning, Meyerowitz, & Holzberg, 1989). Yet we tested the generality of the

findings by examining self-superiority claims on the role of student (Experiment 2, 5-6). We thus implicated roles that represented both a communion, social, warmth, or other-profitable domain (i.e., friend) as well as an agentic, performance, competence, or self-profitable domain (i.e., student; Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002; Judd, James-Hawkins, Yzerbyt, & Kashima, 2005). Experiment 1 set the stage for the assessment of the hubris hypothesis by examining whether observers evaluate a self-superiority claim more unfavorably than a noncomparative positive claim. Experiment 2 tested the generalizability of Experiment 1 findings in the domain of studentship. Experiment 3 assessed whether disapproval of a blatantly comparative strategy accounts for unfavorable evaluations of self-superiority claims: Do observers evaluate a self-superiority more unfavorably than a self-equality claim? Experiment 4 examined whether unfavorable evaluations are restricted to public self-superiority claims while providing a preliminary test of two additional reasons for the dislike of self-superiority claims: positivity of self-view and negativity of other-view. Experiment 5, 6 and 7 further tested these reasons and assessed boundary conditions for unfavorable evaluations. Experiment 5 pitted evaluations of self-superiority claims against evaluations of temporally comparative self-superiority claims. Experiment 6 pitted evaluations of self-superiority claims against evaluations of other-superiority claims. Finally, Experiment 7 pitted evaluations of self-superiority claims against evaluations of self-superiority claims either preceded by a disclaimer or accompanied by persistent disclaimers. In all experiments, participants were undergraduate students at Katholieke Universiteit Leuven. This is a large university with an overwhelmingly Caucasian student population.

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### Experiment 1

Experiment 1 was a preliminary test of the hubris hypothesis. Participants read a quote in which an individual alleged to be either a better friend than others (*self-superiority claim*) or a good friend (*noncomparative positive claim*). Participants then rated the claim and the claimant.

According to the hubris hypothesis, participants would evaluate the self-superiority claim and claimant more unfavorably than the noncomparative positive claim and claimant.

## Method

**Participants and design.** Twenty-six students (18 women, 8 men;  $M_{\text{age}} = 19.65$ ,  $\text{Range}_{\text{age}} = 18\text{-}22$ ) took part for monetary compensation. They were randomly assigned to the two conditions (self-superiority claim, noncomparative positive claim). Design cells in this and all reported experiments were approximately even.

**Procedure.** An experimenter, who (in this and all subsequent experiments) was unaware of hypotheses and conditions, tested participants in groups of 2-10. Each participant was seated in an individual cubicle and handed a booklet containing all materials. The booklet featured either a self-superiority or a noncomparative positive claim that was allegedly taken from a group discussion on personal relationships where an individual described her or his worth as a friend. The *self-superiority claim* read: “You know, I am a better person to be friends with than others... I am more often ready to have a ball... I also do more for people who belong to my circle of friends than others do. I support them when times get tough and I encourage them to achieve their goals, even if these are different from mine. I feel that I find it easier than others to accept my friends as they are... If I compare myself to others, I may well say that I’m more devoted, loyal, and open-minded and that you can have more fun with me.” The *noncomparative positive claim* read: “You know, I am a good person to be friends with... I am often ready to have a ball... I also do a lot for people who belong to my circle of friends. I support them when times get tough and I encourage them to achieve their goals, even if these are different from mine. I feel that I find it easy to accept my friends as they are... If I look at myself, I may well say that I’m devoted, loyal, and open-minded and that you can have a lot of fun with me.”



Participants rated the claim on eight dimensions: unusual-usual, disagreeable-agreeable, unintelligent-intelligent, undesirable-desirable, unsuitable-suitable, unfriendly-friendly, abnormal-normal, worthy of disapproval- worthy of praise. Participants also rated the claimant on the following eight bipolar adjectives: disrespectful-respectful, disagreeable-agreeable, unfriendly-friendly, unintelligent-intelligent, egoistic-altruistic, meddlesome- peaceful, unattractive-attractive, conceited- modest. The 7-point response scales ranged from -3 to +3. The negative pole appeared to the left on half of the dimensions and to the right on the other half.

### Results and Discussion

In all experiments (a) we recoded reverse-scored items so that positive ratings indicated favorable responses, (b) participants' ratings of the claim were correlated with their ratings of the claimant so that we formed a composite by collapsing across the ratings, (c) separate analyses on the ratings of the claim and the claimant yielded findings identical to those of the composite, and (d) no gender differences emerged. We entered the composite (claim  $\alpha = .87$ , claimant  $\alpha = .86$ ;  $r[24] = .77$ ,  $p = .001$ ) into an Analysis of Variance (ANOVA). Consistent with the hubris hypothesis, participants evaluated the self-superiority claim more unfavorably ( $M = -0.56$ ,  $SD = 0.91$ ) than the noncomparative positive claim ( $M = 1.10$ ,  $SD = 0.60$ ),  $F(1,24) = 30.29$ ,  $p = .001$ ;  $h^2_{\text{part}} = .558$ . We proceeded with within-condition analyses. In the self-superiority claim condition, participants' evaluations were unfavorable, with the difference from the scale midpoint (i.e., 0) being significant,  $t(12) = 2.23$ ,  $p = .045$ . In the noncomparative positive claim condition, participants' evaluations were favorable, with the difference from the scale midpoint being significant,  $t(12) = 6.63$ ,  $p = .001$ . These results were consistent with the hubris hypothesis.

### Experiment 2

In Experiment 1, the claim was based on a social role that exemplified the communion dimension. The main objective in Experiment 2 was to test the replicability of Experiment 1, with

a role that exemplified the agency dimension (i.e., studentship). The two dimensions differ. As stated above, agency claims are more verifiable than communion claims, with the former allowing less room for expression of superiority (Dunning et al., 1989; Van Lange, 1991). Also, communion is perceived as more controllable and is more extremely valenced than agency (Van Lange & Sedikides, 1998). Furthermore, observers judge agency- and communion-related behaviors differently (Tausch, Kenworthy, & Hewstone, 2007). Thus, observers more readily admit to using social comparison information in the communal than agentic domain (Wayment & Taylor, 1995), and self-enhancement strivings in the two domains have distinct correlates (Paulhus & John, 1998). Specifically, self-enhancement in the agentic domain is associated with lower peer-rated adjustment, whereas self-enhancement in the communal domain is associated with higher peer-rated adjustment (Church et al., 2006). In all, participants may evaluate differently superiority claims about agency versus communion. Even if self-superiority claims about friendship are detested, superiority claims about studentship may be acquiesced.

Unfavorable evaluations of a self-superiority claim may also be unique to friendship because they may be seen as a contradiction in terms: individuals who put themselves above others may be perceived as inadequate friends and invite unfavorable evaluations. There is no contradiction, however, in being a good student and claiming to be one. An individual who claims to be a superior student may be seen as justifiably proud in her or his achievements. In contrast to the hubris hypothesis, which predicts unfavorable evaluations of both types of self-superiority claims, this alternative explanation predicts that a self-superiority claim about friendship elicits more unfavorable evaluations than a self-superiority claim about studentship.

## Method

**Participants and design.** Seventy-two students (46 women, 26 men;  $M_{\text{age}} = 18.50$ ,  $\text{Range}_{\text{age}} = 18\text{--}24$ ) took part in partial fulfillment of a course option. They were randomly

assigned to the conditions of a 2 (claim: self-superiority, noncomparative positive) x 2 (domain: friendship, studentship) between-subjects design.

**Procedure.** The friendship claim and dependent measures were identical to Experiment 1's. The studentship claim was modeled after the friendship claim. The *self-superiority student claim* read: "You know, I am a better student than others... I attend classes and exercises more regularly than others do... In general, I prepare workshops and classes more thoroughly. I study more during the semester and I try to write good papers, even if the topic is not immediately engaging to me. I feel that I find it easier than others to maintain the discipline to attend classes and work regularly... If I compare myself to others, I may well say that I'm more motivated, hard-working, and persistent and that I make the most of my education." The *noncomparative positive student claim* was identical to the self-superiority student claim except all comparative elements were replaced by non-comparative ones (e.g. "You know, I am a good student...").

## Results and Discussion

We entered the composite (claim  $\alpha = .86$ , claimant  $\alpha = .85$ ;  $r[70] = .69$ ,  $p = .001$ ) into an ANOVA with claim (self-superiority, noncomparative positive) and domain (friendship, studentship) as between-subjects variables. Participants evaluated the self-superiority claim more unfavorably ( $M = -0.81$ ,  $SD = 0.86$ ) than the noncomparative positive claim ( $M = 0.68$ ,  $SD = 0.78$ ),  $F(1, 68) = 60.09$ ,  $p = .001$ ;  $\eta^2_{\text{part}} = .469$ . Importantly, this effect generalized across the friend and student roles, interaction  $F(1, 68) = 1.40$ ,  $p = .240$ ;  $\eta^2_{\text{part}} = .020$ . The domain main effect was not significant either,  $F(1, 68) = 1.67$ ,  $p = .200$ ;  $\eta^2_{\text{part}} = .024$ . Also, participants' evaluations were unfavorable in the self-superiority claim condition,  $t(35) = 5.66$ ,  $p = .001$ , and favorable in the noncomparative positive claim condition,  $t(35) = 5.21$ ,  $p = .001$ .

Experiment 2 replicated and extended Experiment 1. People dislike self-superiority claims more than noncomparative positive claims. Moreover, they dislike self-superiority claims,

whereas they like noncomparative positive claims. These evaluations generalize across communion and agency. The findings are consistent with the hubris hypothesis and inconsistent with the alternative explanation.

### Experiment 3

Experiment 3 was designed to test a reason why self-superiority claims are condemned. This may be due to such claims violating social norms that deter blatant social comparison. Put otherwise, blatant social comparison is a reason for unfavorable responses. If so, then, *any* blatantly comparative self-claim, regardless of whether it conveyed superiority or not, would evoke unfavorable evaluations. We labeled this reason *disapproval of social comparison*.

The experiment involved two conditions. The self-superiority claim condition was identical to that of Experiment 1. In the self-equality claim condition, the claimant compared the self with others but concluded in favor of egalitarianism. The disapproval of social comparison reason would be supported, if participants evaluated the claim and the claimant equally negatively in the two conditions. Given that Experiment 2 yielded no differential evaluations of friendship versus studentship claims, we returned to the domain of friendship, for simplicity.

### Method

**Participants and design.** Twenty-six students (19 women, 7 men;  $M_{\text{age}} = 20.10$ ,  $\text{Range}_{\text{age}} = 17\text{-}23$ ) took part for monetary compensation. They were randomly assigned to the experimental conditions (self-superiority claim, self-equality claim).

**Procedure.** The procedure was identical to that of Experiment 1, except that participants read either a self-superiority claim (the same as in Experiment 1) or a self-equality claim. The latter read: “You know, I am as good a person to be friends with as others are... I am as often ready to have a ball... I also do as much for people who belong to my circle of friends as they do for me. I support them when times get tough and I encourage them to achieve their goals, even if

these are different from mine. I feel that I find it as easy as others to accept my friends as they are... If I compare myself to others, I may well say that I'm as devoted, loyal, and open-minded, and that you have as much fun with me."

### Results and Discussion

We entered the composite score (claim  $\alpha = .88$ , claimant  $\alpha = .89$ ;  $r[24] = .82$ ,  $p = .001$ ) into an ANOVA. Participants evaluated the self-superiority claim more unfavorably ( $M = -0.84$ ,  $SD = 0.91$ ) than the self-equality claim ( $M = 0.23$ ,  $SD = 1.11$ ),  $F(1, 24) = 7.20$ ,  $p = .013$ ;  $\eta^2_{\text{part}} = .231$ . In addition, participants' evaluations were unfavorable in the self-superiority claim condition,  $t(12) = 3.35$ ,  $p = .006$ , and neutral in the self-equality condition,  $t(12) = .73$ ,  $p = .478$ .

These findings further bolster the hubris hypothesis while being inconsistent with the disapproval of social comparison reason. Nevertheless, eyeballing evaluations of the self-equality claim of Experiment 3 and the noncomparative positive claims of Experiments 1-2 hints at a discrepancy: participants were neutral toward the self-equality claim, but were favorable toward the noncomparative positive claim. This pattern suggests that disapproval of social comparison may explain, in part, the dislike of self-superiority claims. We provided a more rigorous test of this possibility through an experimental design that included both a self-equality claim and a noncomparative positive claim condition.

### Experiment 4

Experiment 4 aimed to provide a more complete test of the hubris hypothesis, while assessing more rigorously the disapproval of social comparison reason. In particular, this experiment pitted a self-superiority claim against a self-equality claim and a noncomparative positive claim. Disapproval of social comparison, once again, anticipated that participants would find the self-equality claim as disagreeable as the self-superiority claim.

Experiment 4 also explored two additional reasons possibly accounting for unfavorable evaluations of self-superiority claims. Such exploration was based on participants' self-reports (i.e., ratings) that followed evaluation of claim and claimant. One reason is that self-superiority claims convey an unduly positive, and likely unrealistic, self-view. We thus asked participants to rate how, according to them, the claimant viewed himself or herself as a friend. Support for the *positivity of self-view* reason would be obtained, if participants attributed to the claimant a more positive self-view in the self-superiority condition than in the noncomparative positive and self-equality conditions. The other reason is that self-superiority claims place others under a negative light. According to this *negativity of other-view* reason, participants infer from the self-superiority (vs. noncomparative positive or self-equality) claim that the claimant endorses a negative view of others. Granted, the claim "I'm better than others" does not necessarily imply that others are bad, but observers may interpret it as such. Relatedly, individuals who transmit negative views of others are disliked (Skowronski, Carlston, Mae, & Crawford, 1998).

Finally, Experiment 4 extended Experiments 1-3 by examining evaluations of claims that were stated not only in public but also in private (i.e., anonymously). It is possible that self-superiority claims made in public are regarded as particularly offensive. If so, privately made self-superiority claims would be judged less unfavorably than publicly made ones.

## Method

**Participants and design.** Sixty-six students (42 women, 24 men;  $M_{\text{age}} = 20.21$ ,  $\text{Range}_{\text{age}} = 18\text{-}31$ ) took part in partial fulfillment of a course option. Participants were randomly assigned to the conditions of a 3 (claim: self-superiority, noncomparative positive, self-equality) x 2 (setting: public, private) between-subjects design.

**Procedure.** Participants read one of three types of self-claims (self-superiority, self-equality, noncomparative positive). In the public condition, the instructions were identical to

those of Experiments 1-3. In the private condition, participants were informed that the claimant had written down the claim as part of an anonymous questionnaire. Participants evaluated the claim and the claimant, as in Experiments 1-3. In addition, they rated how good they thought the claimant believed to be as a friend (0 = *not at all*, 10 = *very much*), and also how good they thought the claimant regarded others as friends (0 = *not at all*, 10 = *very much*). We used the former (*claimant-as-friend*) ratings to test the positivity of self-view reason, and we used the latter (*others-as-friends*) ratings to test the negativity of other-view reason.

## Results and Discussion

**Evaluations of claims.** We entered the composite (claim  $\alpha = .90$ , claimant  $\alpha = .88$ ;  $r[64] = .80$ ,  $p = .001$ ) into an ANOVA with claim (self-superiority, noncomparative positive, self-equality) and setting (public, private) as between-subjects variables. The crucial claim main effect was significant,  $F(2, 60) = 13.63$ ,  $p = .001$ ;  $\eta^2_{\text{part}} = .31$ . Tukey tests revealed that participants evaluated the self-superiority claim more unfavorably ( $M = -0.52$ ,  $SD = 0.93$ ) than the noncomparative positive claim ( $M = 1.02$ ,  $SD = 0.92$ ),  $p = .001$ , or the self-equality claim ( $M = 0.35$ ,  $SD = 1.07$ ),  $p = .013$ . Participants tended to evaluate the self-equality claim more unfavorably than the noncomparative positive claim,  $p = .068$ . Neither the setting main effect,  $F(1, 60) = 0.74$ ,  $p = .392$ ;  $\eta^2_{\text{part}} = .012$ , nor the interaction,  $F(2, 60) = .82$ ,  $p = .446$ ;  $\eta^2_{\text{part}} = .027$ , were significant. These findings are consistent with the hubris hypothesis, generalizing it in both public and private settings. Finally, participants' responses were unfavorable in the self-superiority claim condition,  $t(21) = 2.62$ ,  $p = .02$ , neutral in the self-equality claim condition,  $t(21) = 1.54$ ,  $p = .137$ , and favorable in the noncomparative positive claim,  $t(21) = 5.19$ ,  $p = .001$ .

**Claimant-as-friend.** According to the positivity of self-view reason, self-superiority claims impart a more positive view of the self than noncomparative positive or self-equality claims. We conducted an ANOVA on the claimant-as-friend ratings with claim (self-superiority,

noncomparative positive, self-equality) and setting (public, private) as between-subjects factors. The analyses yielded null effects, all  $F$ s < 1.6. Participants thought that the claimant believed to be an equally good friend in the self-superiority claim ( $M = 9.14$ ,  $SD = 1.04$ ), the noncomparative positive claim ( $M = 8.59$ ,  $SD = 1.40$ ), and the self-equality claim ( $M = 8.45$ ,  $SD = 1.50$ ) conditions. The positivity of self-view reason thus received no support. Evaluations of claims were unrelated to perceptions of the claimant's self-view as a friend,  $r(64) = -.03$ ,  $p = .829$ .

**Others-as-friends.** According to the negativity of other-view reason, self-superiority claims impart a more negative view of others than noncomparative positive or self-equality claims. We conducted an ANOVA on the others-as-friends ratings with claim (self-superiority, noncomparative positive, self-equality) and setting (public, private) as between-subjects variables. The crucial claim main effect was significant,  $F(2, 60) = 11.00$ ,  $p = .001$ ;  $\eta^2_{\text{part}} = .268$ . Tukey tests revealed that participants attributed to the claimant a more negative view of others as friends in the self-superiority claim condition ( $M = 4.27$ ,  $SD = 1.72$ ) than the noncomparative positive claim condition ( $M = 6.23$ ,  $SD = 1.95$ ),  $p = .006$ , or the self-equality claim condition ( $M = 7.05$ ,  $SD = 2.21$ ),  $p = .001$ . The results are consistent with the negativity of other-view account: Individuals who make self-superiority claims are disliked because such claims convey a negative view of others. Indeed, the more negative the claimant's view of others as friends was perceived, the more negative the evaluations of her or his claim were,  $r(64) = .44$ ,  $p = .001$ .

**Summary.** Regardless of presentational (i.e., public vs. private) setting, participants disliked the self-superiority claim more than the noncomparative positive or self-equality claims. They also disliked the self-equality claim somewhat more than the noncomparative positive claim. Moreover, participants thought that the claimant conveyed a more negative impression of others as friends in the self-superiority claim relative to the self-equality or noncomparative positive claim. Finally, participants evaluated the claimant more unfavorably the more negative



they perceived her or his view of others as friends. The findings (a) rule out definitively disapproval of social comparison, (b) rule out preliminarily the positivity of self-view reason, and (c) support preliminarily the negativity of other-view reason.

### Experiment 5

We have focused thus far on socially comparative self-superiority claims. But how about temporally comparative self-superiority claims (“I’m a better friend now than I used to be”)? Temporal comparisons occur at least as frequently as social comparisons do, and serve similar psychological goals (Albert, 1977; Frye & Karney, 2002; Wilson & Ross, 2000). People are therefore as likely to make and encounter socially comparative as frequently as temporally comparative self-superiority claims. Just like socially comparative self-superiority claims, temporally comparative ones convey prevalent and positive self-perceptions, namely, perceptions of self-improvement (Sedikides & Hepper, 2009). However, temporally and socially comparative self-superiority claims differ in that the former do not imply superiority to others. Therefore, the main objective of Experiment 5 was to examine evaluations of temporally comparative self-superiority claims along with evaluations of socially comparative self-superiority claims.

An additional objective of Experiment 5 was to provide a follow-up test of the positivity of self-view reason and the negativity of others-view reason for disliking self-superiority claims. Most people report self-improvement in their lives (i.e., make temporally comparative claims) and regard self-improvement as positive (Sedikides & Hepper, 2009; Sedikides & Strube, 1997). However, it not clear whether temporally comparative claims are seen by observers as reflecting a positive claimant self-view. Even if they are, such claims may be seen as reflecting a *less* positive claimant self-view than socially comparative claims do. Temporally comparative claims may imply personal strivings, self-knowledge, and a touch of humility, whereas socially

comparative claims may imply competitiveness, lack of self-insight, and conceitedness. The final objective of Experiment 5 was to provide a follow-up test of the negativity of others-view reason.

Participants responded either to temporally comparative or socially comparative claims pertaining either to friendship or studentship. We returned to the communion versus agency manipulation, given the novelty of the current experimental design. The hubris hypothesis anticipates that disapproval of self-superiority claims is intrinsically related to the socially comparative nature of these claims. The hypothesis predicted that participant would dislike socially comparative claims more than temporally comparative ones. We anticipated that participants would perceive socially comparative claims as reflecting a more positive claimant self-view than temporally comparative ones. Finally, we expected for the negativity of others-view reason to be prevalent in socially comparative, but not temporally comparative, claims, given that only the former transmit unequivocally disdain for others.

## Method

**Participants and design.** Forty-eight students (41 women, 7 men;  $M_{\text{age}} = 18.08$ ,  $Range_{\text{age}} = 17-19$ ) participated in fulfillment of a course option. They were randomly assigned to the conditions of a 2 (claim: socially comparative, temporally comparative) x 2 (domain: friendship, studentship) between-subjects design.

**Procedure.** Participants read a socially or temporally comparative self-superiority claim about friendship or studentship. The socially comparative claims were identical to the ones used previously (friendship: Experiment 1-4; studentship: Experiment 2). The temporally comparative claims were derived from socially comparative claims, with the claimant comparing the present self to the past self. For instance, the *temporally comparative friend claim* read: “You know, I am a better person now to be friends with than I was in the past... I am more often ready to have a ball... I also do more for the people who belong to my circle of friends than I used to do. I

support them when times get rough and I encourage them to achieve their goals, even if these are different from mine. I feel that I find it easier than I did in the past to accept my friends as they are... If I compare myself to how I used to be, I may well say that I'm now more devoted, loyal, and open-minded and that you can have more fun with me nowadays."

Participants evaluated the self-superiority claim and claimant. They also rated how good they thought the claimant (a) believed to be as a friend and student, and (b) regarded others as friends and students (0 = *not at all*, 10 = *very much*). We used the former ratings (*claimant-as-friend*, *claimant-as-students*) to test the positivity of self-view reason, and we used the latter ratings (*others-as-friends*, *others-as-students*) to test the negativity of other-view reason.

## Results and Discussion

**Evaluations of claims.** We entered the composite (claim  $\alpha = .94$ , claimant  $\alpha = .91$ ;  $r[46] = .87$ ,  $p = .001$ ) into an ANOVA with claim (socially comparative, temporally comparative) and domain (friendship, studentship) as between-subjects factors. The crucial claim main effect was significant: participants evaluated the socially comparative claim more unfavorably ( $M = -0.65$ ,  $SD = 0.96$ ) than the temporally comparative claim ( $M = 1.33$ ,  $SD = 0.84$ ),  $F(1, 44) = 55.87$ ,  $p = .001$ ;  $\eta^2_{\text{part}} = .559$ . This pattern generalized across domain, interaction  $F(1, 44) = 0.31$ ,  $p = .577$ ;  $\eta^2_{\text{part}} = .007$ . The domain main effect was not significant,  $F(1, 44) = 0.71$ ,  $p = .407$ ;  $\eta^2_{\text{part}} = .016$ . Finally, participants' evaluations were unfavorable in the socially comparative claim conditions,  $t(23) = 3.30$ ,  $p = .003$ , and were favorable in the temporally comparative claim condition,  $t(23) = 7.70$ ,  $p = .001$ . The findings are consistent with the hubris hypothesis and show that people generally like self-improvement claims.

**Claimant-as-friend and claimant-as-student.** We expected that participants would infer a more positive claimant self-view from socially comparative than temporally comparative

claims. This was indeed the case. An ANOVA with claim (socially comparative, temporally comparative) and domain (friendship, studentship) as between-subjects variables produced a claim main effect: participants thought that the claimant viewed the self as a better friend/student in the socially comparative claim condition ( $M = 9.04$ ,  $SD = 1.38$ ) than in the temporally comparative claim condition ( $M = 7.75$ ,  $SD = 1.03$ ),  $F(1, 44) = 13.26$ ,  $p = .001$ ;  $\eta^2_{\text{part}} = .232$ . Neither the interaction,  $F(1, 44) = 0.35$ ,  $p = .560$ ;  $\eta^2_{\text{part}} = .008$ , nor the domain main effect,  $F(1, 44) = 1.67$ ,  $p = .203$ ;  $\eta^2_{\text{part}} = .037$ , were significant.

**Others-as-friend and others-as-students.** We expected that participants would infer a more negative claimant view of others from socially comparative than temporally comparative claims. Again, this was the case. An ANOVA with claim (socially comparative, temporally comparative) and domain (friendship, studentship) as between-subjects variables yielded a claim main effect: participants attributed to the claimant a more negative view of others as friends/students in the socially comparative claim condition ( $M = 3.33$ ,  $SD = 2.04$ ) than in the temporally comparative claim condition ( $M = 6.33$ ,  $SD = 1.34$ ),  $F(1, 44) = 38.12$ ,  $p = .001$ ;  $\eta^2_{\text{part}} = .232$ . The domain main effect was also significant: participants attributed to the claimant a more negative view of others in reference to studentship ( $M = 4.33$ ,  $SD = 2.18$ ) than friendship ( $M = 5.33$ ,  $SD = 2.32$ ),  $F(1, 44) = 4.24$ ,  $p = .046$ ;  $\eta^2_{\text{part}} = .088$ . However, the interaction was not significant,  $F(1, 44) = 0.001$ ,  $p = .99$ ;  $\eta^2_{\text{part}} = .001$ .

**Correlational analysis.** To assess the contribution of the inferred (positive) claimant self-view versus the inferred (negative) claimant view of others to the evaluations of claim and claimant, we conducted a multiple regression analysis on claim evaluations. We entered simultaneously as predictors claimant self-view, claimant view of others, domain, and claim. Whereas claimant view of others was significant ( $\beta = 0.26$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ), claimant self-view was

not ( $\beta = -0.13$ ,  $p = 0.213$ ). (Claim was significant,  $\beta = 1.04$ ,  $p = 0.005$ , domain was not,  $\beta = 0.42$ ,  $p = 0.095$ .) Inferred view of others thus predicted evaluations whereas inferred self-view did not.

**Summary.** Participants disliked socially comparative claims relative to temporally comparative claims. In absolute terms, they disliked the former, whereas they liked the latter. Besides showing that self-improvement claims evoke favorable evaluations, these findings are consistent with the hubris hypothesis. Also, participants inferred a more positive claimant self-view, and a more negative claimant other-view, from socially comparative than temporally comparative claims. Inferred negative claimant view of others accounted more satisfactorily for evaluations of self-superiority claims than (inferred) positive claimant view of self. Given that socially comparative (but not temporally comparative) claims provoked unfavorable evaluation, we returned in Experiment 6 to socially comparative claims.

### Experiment 6

Experiment 6 tested a central tenet of the hubris hypothesis: participants evaluate unfavorably superiority claims about the *self* as opposed to another person (generic superiority claims). Also, the experiment focused more deeply on the emerging reason for the hubris hypothesis, namely the projection to the claimant of a negative view of others.

Participants evaluated either a self-superiority or an other-superiority claim that referred either to friendship or studentship. They also rated the claimant's view of the target (i.e., self in the self-superiority condition, unspecified other in the other-superiority condition) as friend or student. Finally, they rated the claimant's view of people in general as friends or students. We will use the label 'view of people in general' rather than 'view of others' to avoid confusion with the unspecified 'other' whose superiority or equality the claimant described.

According to the hubris hypothesis, participants would evaluate the self-superiority claim more unfavorably than the other-superiority claim. Also, the (inferred) claimant negative view of

others as friends or students would be reported as a reason for these unfavorable responses. Nevertheless, we zeroed in on this explanation by testing whether the (inferred) claimant negative view of the unspecified other or of people in general would account for response unfavorability. Finally, we implemented a methodological control. People perceive self-descriptions differently than other-descriptions. For example, they make more extreme inferences from the latter than the former (Brandt, Vonk, & Van Knippenberg, 2009). Therefore, in an effort to disentangle evaluating self- and other-*superiority claims* from generally evaluating self- and other-*claims*, we included baseline conditions that involved self-equality and other-equality claims.

## Method

**Participants and design.** Ninety-six students (59 women, 37 men;  $M_{\text{age}} = 18.37$ ,  $\text{Range}_{\text{age}} = 17\text{-}24$ ) participated for fulfilling a course option. They were randomly assigned to the conditions of a 2 (claim: superiority, equality) x 2 (target: self, other) x 2 (domain: friendship, studentship) between-subjects design.

**Procedure.** Participants evaluated a superiority or an equality claim about the self versus another person. All claims were thus comparative. Claims pertained either to friendship or studentship. The materials and measures in the self-superiority and self-equality claim conditions were identical to those of previous experiments. We adjusted the other-superiority and other-equality claims after the self-superiority and -equality claims, respectively. The sole difference was that the other-superiority and other-equality claims now referred to an unnamed person rather than the claimant. The gender of this unnamed person always matched the participant's gender. For instance, the female version of the *other-superiority claim* read: "You know, she is a better person to be friends with than others... She is more often ready to have a ball... She also does more for people who belong to her circle of friends than others do. She supports them when times get tough and she encourages them to achieve their goals, even if these are different from hers. I

notice that she finds it easier than others to accept her friends as they are... If I compare her to others, I may well say that she is more devoted, loyal, and open-minded and that you can have more fun with her.” Participants rated the claimant’s view of the target (i.e., self vs. unspecified other) as friend or student, as well as the claimant’s view of people in general as friends or students.

## Results and Discussion

**Evaluations of claims.** We entered the composite (claim alpha = .85, claimant alpha = .89;  $r[94] = .75, p = .001$ ) into an ANOVA with claim (superiority, equality), target (self, other) and domain (friendship, studentship) as between-subjects variables. Replicating past findings, participants evaluated the superiority claim more unfavorably ( $M = 0.26, SD = 1.04$ ) than the equality claim ( $M = 1.22, SD = 0.71$ ), claim main effect  $F(1, 88) = 21.33, p = .001; \eta^2_{\text{part}} = .195$ . Also, participants evaluated self-claims more unfavorably ( $M = 0.39, SD = 1.07$ ) than other-claims ( $M = 1.09, SD = 0.81$ ), target main effect  $F(1, 88) = 40.42, p = .001; \eta^2_{\text{part}} = .315$ .

The crucial claim x target interaction was significant,  $F(1, 88) = 25.40, p = .001; \eta^2_{\text{part}} = .224$ . Participants evaluated the self-superiority claim more unfavorably ( $M = -0.47, SD = 0.62$ ) than the self-equality claim ( $M = 0.99, SD = 0.84$ ),  $t(46) = 6.84, p = .001$ , but they did not differ in their evaluation of the other-superiority claim ( $M = 1.25, SD = 0.64$ ) and the other-equality claim ( $M = 1.19, SD = 0.79$ ),  $t(46) = 0.31, p = .761$ . Participants evaluated the self-superiority claim unfavorably,  $t(23) = 3.69, p = .001$ , but evaluated the other-superiority claim favorably,  $t(23) = 9.60, p = .001$ . Finally, they evaluated favorably both the self-equality claim,  $t(23) = 5.78, p = .001$ , and the other-equality claim,  $t(23) = 7.35, p = .001$ .

**Target-as-friend and target-as-student.** Participants inferred the claimant’s view of the target (self vs. other) as friend or student. The ANOVA with claim (superiority, equality), target (self, other) and domain (friendship, studentship) as between-subjects variables yielded only one

significant effect. Participants inferred that the claimant held a more positive view of the target (self or other) in the superiority condition ( $M = 8.75$ ,  $SD = 1.21$ ) than in the equality condition ( $M = 7.75$ ,  $SD = 1.59$ ), claim main effect  $F(1, 88) = 11.58$ ,  $p = .001$ ;  $\eta^2_{\text{part}} = .116$ .

**People in general-as-friends and people in general-as-students.** Participants also inferred the claimant's view of people in general as friends or students. The claim main effect was significant: participants inferred that the claimant held a more negative view of people in general in the superiority ( $M = 4.85$ ,  $SD = 1.68$ ) than equality ( $M = 6.90$ ,  $SD = 1.48$ ) condition,  $F(1, 88) = 43.73$ ,  $p = .001$ ;  $\eta^2_{\text{part}} = .332$ . The claim x target interaction was also significant,  $F(1, 88) = 9.63$ ,  $p = .003$ ;  $\eta^2_{\text{part}} = .099$ . Participants inferred that the claimant held a more negative view of people in general in the self-superiority condition ( $M = 4.12$ ,  $SD = 1.57$ ) than the self-equality condition ( $M = 7.12$ ,  $SD = 1.36$ ),  $t(46) = 7.07$ ,  $p = .001$ . They also inferred that the claimant held a more negative view of people in general in the other-superiority condition ( $M = 5.58$ ,  $SD = 1.47$ ) than the other-equality condition ( $M = 6.67$ ,  $SD = 1.58$ ),  $t(46) = 2.46$ ,  $p = .018$ .

**Correlational analysis.** In order to gauge the contribution of the (inferred) claimant view of the target and of people in general to claim response favorability, we conducted a multiple regression analysis in which we entered simultaneously as predictors (inferred) claimant view of the target, (inferred) claimant view of people in general, target, domain, and claim. Both claimant view of the target ( $\beta = 0.13$ ,  $p = 0.025$ ) and claimant view of people in general ( $\beta = 0.20$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ) predicted evaluations. Target ( $\beta = 0.91$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ) and claim ( $\beta = 0.41$ ,  $p = 0.039$ ) also predicted evaluations, but domain did not ( $\beta = 0.001$ ,  $p = 0.993$ ).

We proceeded with separate multiple regression analyses for the two target conditions. Evaluations of self-claims (i.e., self-superiority, self-equality) were predicted by the inferred claimant view of people in general ( $\beta = 0.28$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ), but not by the inferred claimant self-view ( $\beta = 0.06$ ,  $p > 0.48$ ). In contrast, evaluations of other-claims (i.e., other-superiority, other-



equality) were predicted by the inferred claimant view of the target ( $\beta = 0.20, p = 0.004$ ) but not by the inferred claimant view of people in general ( $\beta = 0.002, p = 0.977$ ).

**Summary.** The results, once again, supported the hubris hypothesis. Participants disliked self-superiority claims relatively (i.e., vis à vis self-equality claims) and absolutely. Moreover, the results added to the specificity of the hubris hypothesis. Participants disliked superiority claims when they were directed to the self, not to another person, and this self-other difference was confined to superiority claims, not to other (e.g., equality) claims.

The results were consistent with the idea that participants' dislike of self-superiority claims is due (at least in part) to the negative view of people in general that such claims convey. Although participants inferred a more negative view of people in general from superiority than equality claims, they inferred an even more negative view from a self-superiority claim than from an other-superiority claim. Admittedly, participants also thought that the claimant had a more positive view of the target in the superiority condition than in the equality condition. Yet the multiple regression analysis showed that inferred view of people in general predicted responses to self-claims, whereas inferred view of target predicted responses to other-claims. This finding corroborates the notion that participants evaluate differently self-claims and other-claims.

### Experiment 7

Our research so far has established that participants dislike self-superiority claims, as such claims convey a negative view of others. Self-superiority claims, then, offend participants' social sensitivities. They may also offend their self-sensitivities: a negative view of "others" may entail a negative view of the participant ("observer"). In Experiment 7, we attempted to disentangle the roles of inferred negative views of people in general and inferred negative views of the observer.

We included the standard experimental (i.e., self-superiority claim) and control (i.e., noncomparative positive claim) conditions. In an effort to refine the hubris hypothesis, we added

two control conditions. One involved a *subtle disclaimer*. Prior research has suggested that disclaimers can backfire. A claimant who introduced a disclaimer (“I’m not lazy/I don’t mean to sound selfish but...”) before describing a behavior that might imply laziness or selfishness was perceived as more lazy and selfish, but no less likeable, than a no-disclaimer claimant (El-Alayli, Myers, Petersen, & Lystad, 2008, Studies 2-3). Nevertheless, given differences between the methodology of prior research (i.e., focus on trait-relevant disclaimer and self-claim) and the current research (i.e., focus on role-relevant disclaimer and self-claim, on multiple traits, and on both the claimant and the claim), and given the prior research’s conflicting findings on likeability, we opted for another test of the idea that subtle disclaimers increase the unfavorability of self-superiority claims. In fact, we expanded the assessment of this idea by including in the design an additional condition involving a *blatant disclaimer*. This featured the consistent and repeated denial of a self-superiority claim. All claims pertained to the domain of friendship.

## Method

**Participants and design.** Sixty-four student volunteers (56 women, 8 men;  $M_{\text{age}} = 21.58$ ,  $\text{Range}_{\text{age}} = 19\text{--}25$ ) were randomly assigned to the experimental conditions (self-superiority claim, noncomparative positive claim, subtle disclaimer, blatant disclaimer).

**Procedure.** Participants evaluated a self-superiority claim, a noncomparative positive claim, a subtle disclaimer, or a blatant disclaimer. The claims in the first two conditions were identical to those used in the friendship conditions of previous experiments. The simplest way to describe the difference between the subtle and the blatant disclaimer condition is by saying that the former did and the latter did not include a self-superiority claim. In the *subtle disclaimer* condition, the claim began with: “You know, I don’t mean to say that I am a better person to be friends with than others, but...” and then continued as in the self-superiority claim condition. In the *blatant disclaimer* condition, the claim read as follows: “You know, I don’t mean to say that I

am a better person to be friends with than others... That I am more often ready to have a ball or the like... Or that I do more for the people who belong to my circle of friends. I support them when times get rough and I encourage them to achieve their goals, even if these are different from mine. I am not saying that I feel that I find it easier than others to accept my friends as they are... If I compare myself to others, I would not dare to say that I'm more devoted, loyal, and open-minded and that you can have more fun with me."

Participants completed the same measures of evaluations of claims, as in prior experiments. Also as in some prior experiments (e.g., 4-6), they rated the claimant's view of the self as friend, and the claimant's view of people in general as friends. Finally, they rated the claimant's view of themselves (*view of observer*). To elicit these ratings, we asked participants how they thought the claimant would view them.

## Results and Discussion

We conducted a one-way ANOVA with claim as the sole independent variable on each measure. We followed up main effects with Tukey tests.

**Evaluations of claims.** An ANOVA on the composite (claim  $\alpha = .84$ , claimant  $\alpha = .91$ ,  $r[62] = .73$ ,  $p = .001$ ) yielded a main effect,  $F(3, 60) = 8.98$ ,  $p = .001$ ;  $\eta^2_{\text{part}} = .31$ . In replication of previous experiments and in support of the hubris hypothesis, participants evaluated the self-superiority claim more unfavorably ( $M = -0.54$ ,  $SD = 0.67$ ) than the noncomparative positive claim ( $M = 0.70$ ,  $SD = 1.06$ ),  $p = .001$ . However, they did not differentially evaluate the self-superiority claim and the subtle disclaimer ( $M = -0.18$ ,  $SD = 1.03$ ),  $p = .655$ . In contrast to relevant past research (El-Alayli et al., 2008), subtle disclaimers did not worsen evaluations of the claimant (and the claim). Finally, participants evaluated the self-superiority more unfavorably than the blatant disclaimer ( $M = 0.83$ ,  $SD = 0.77$ ),  $p = .001$ . Consistent and vehement denial of self-superiority softened evaluations.

As in previously reported experiments, participants' responses were unfavorable to the self-superiority claim,  $t(15) = 3.24, p = .006$ , but favorable to the noncomparative positive claim,  $t(15) = 2.66, p = .018$ . Their evaluations of the subtle disclaimer were neutral,  $t(15) = 0.69, p = .499$ . Again, such a disclaimer appeared to make the self-superiority claim more palatable to participants. Finally, evaluations of the blatant disclaimer were favorable,  $t(15) = 4.34, p = .001$ . Ironically, saying what one "does not mean to say" was received favorably by participants.

**Claimant-as-friend.** An ANOVA on the claimant-as-friend ratings yielded a main effect,  $F(3, 60) = 12.64, p = .001; \eta^2_{\text{part}} = .39$ . As in Experiments 4-5, participants inferred an equally positive claimant self-view from the self-superiority claim ( $M = 9.37, SD = 0.72$ ) and the noncomparative positive claim ( $M = 9.00, SD = 0.82$ ),  $p = .678$ . However, participants inferred a somewhat more positive claimant self-view from the self-superiority claim than from the subtle disclaimer ( $M = 8.50, SD = 1.03$ ),  $p = .053$ . Even a subtle disclaimer made the claimant appear more modest. But it was a blatant disclaimer that gave off a strong impression of claimant modesty. Here, participants inferred the least positive claimant self-view ( $M = 7.44, SD = 1.15$ ), with the blatant disclaimer condition differing significantly from all others, all  $ps < .012$ .

**Others-as-friends.** An ANOVA on the others-as-friends ratings yielded a main effect,  $F(3, 60) = 8.31, p = .001; \eta^2_{\text{part}} = .29$ . As in Experiments 4-5, participants inferred a more negative claimant view of others from the self-superiority claim ( $M = 4.44, SD = 2.00$ ) than the noncomparative positive claim ( $M = 6.62, SD = 1.86$ ),  $p = .003$ . Participants' inferences of the claimant view of others did not differ in the self-superiority claim condition and the subtle disclaimer condition ( $M = 4.81, SD = 0.91$ ),  $p = .500$ . However, participants inferred a more negative claimant view of others from the self-superiority claim compared to the blatant disclaimer ( $M = 6.31, SD = 0.87$ ),  $p = .002$ . A blatant disclaimer conveyed a relatively positive view of others, at least as positive as the view that a noncomparative claim conveyed,  $p = .547$ .

**View of observer.** An ANOVA on observer ratings also yielded a main effect,  $F(3, 60) = 4.81, p = .005; \eta^2_{\text{part}} = .19$ . Participants inferred that the claimant held a more negative view of them in the self-superiority claim condition ( $M = 5.19, SD = 1.94$ ) than the noncomparative positive claim condition ( $M = 6.81, SD = 1.87$ ),  $p = .032$ . They inferred that the claimant held an equally negative view of them in the self-superiority claim condition and the subtle disclaimer condition ( $M = 5.06, SD = 1.57$ ),  $p = .018$ . Finally, they inferred that the claimant held a somewhat more negative view of them in the self-superiority claim condition than the blatant disclaimer condition ( $M = 6.50, SD = 0.97$ ),  $p = .072$ . A blatant disclaimer softened the negativity of participants' impressions. Alternatively, participants inferred an equally positive claimant view of them from the blatant disclaimer and the noncomparative claim,  $p = .948$ .

**Correlational analyses.** So far the results have shown that self-superiority claims evoke (a) unfavorable responses and (b) the inference of a positive claimant self-view, a negative claimant view of others, and a negative claimant view of the observer. In Experiments 4-6, participants' evaluations of claims were correlated with inferred claimant views of others, but not or to a lesser extent with inferred claimant self-view. We wondered whether participants' evaluations of claims would be predicted by inferred view of the observer. We conducted a multiple regression analysis, in which we entered simultaneously claimant self-view, claimant view of others, claimant view of the observer, and claim. Claimant view of the observer predicted evaluations ( $\beta = 0.25, p = 0.011$ ), whereas none of the other variables did ( $\beta_s = 0.10, ps > 0.34$ ).

**Summary.** A subtle disclaimer did not amplify unfavorable evaluations of self-superiority claims. If anything, it somewhat neutralized dislike for such claims and the claimant. Moreover, a blatant disclaimer increased the evaluation of self-superiority claims. Persistent denial of making such claims paid off in rendering both the claims and the claimant markedly more acceptable to observers. Here, the claimant was seen as more modest, and as having a relatively positive view

of others and the observer. Finally, attributing the claimant a negative view of the observer emerged as the most potent explanation of unfavorability toward self-superiority claims.

### General Discussion

People's self-superiority beliefs are legend. Such beliefs are found across judgmental domains, age groups, and cultures (Alicke & Sedikides, 2011; Chiu et al., 2011; Hoorens, 1993; Sedikides & Gregg, 2008). Given the prevalence of such beliefs, it is to be expected that, sooner or later (and despite societal sanctions to the contrary; Eagly & Aksen, 1971; Sedikides et al., 2007), the beliefs will manifest as claims. How are such claims perceived by observers? What are the interpersonal consequences of the claims? To address these questions and clarify conflicting findings in the literature (Bond et al., 2000; Robinson et al., 1995; Schlenker & Leary, 1982; Vonk, 1999), we proposed the *hubris hypothesis* and tested it in seven experiments.

### The Hubris Hypothesis: Summary of Findings

The hubris hypothesis posits that observers detest self-superiority claims relative to assorted positive claims about the self. To test this tenet, we pitted self-superiority claims against other positive claims. Observers disliked self-superiority claims more than noncomparative positive claims (Experiments 1-2, 4), self-equality claims (Experiments 3-4, 6), temporally comparative self-superiority claims (Experiment 5), other-superiority claims (Experiment 6), and blatant disclaimers (Experiment 7). They also disliked self-superiority claims to the same degree as subtle self-superiority claims (Experiment 7). The results generalized across domain (friendship vs. studentship; Experiments 2 and 5) and setting (private vs. public; Experiment 4). Also, the results were specific to self-superiority as opposed to other-superiority claims (Experiment 6). The findings back the hubris hypothesis.

The hubris hypothesis also posits that observers detest self-superiority claims in an absolute sense. This hypothesis was confirmed in all seven experiments. Observers (a) liked

noncomparative positive claims, (b) were neutral, if not somewhat favorable, toward self-equality claims, (c) were neutral toward the subtle disclaimer, and (d) liked the temporally comparative, other-superiority, and other-equality claims, as well as the blatant disclaimer.

Why are self-superiority claims frowned upon? We tested three reasons. First, such claims violate societal norms against unabashed social comparison (*disapproval of social comparison*). We obtained no support for this reason: participants still disliked self-superiority claims more than self-equality claims, despite the fact that the latter imply social comparison as much as the former do. Second, self-superiority claims convey an extremely, and probably unrealistically, positive self-view of the claimant (*positivity of self-view*). Even though in some of our studies participants inferred a more positive self-view from self-superiority claims than from other types of self- and other-claims, these inferences did not consistently predict their evaluations of the claims. Third, such claims convey a negative view that the claimant has of others, including the observer (*negativity of other-view, negativity of observer-view*). Indeed, participants inferred a more negative view of others and of them from self-superiority claims than from other types of self- and other-claims. Moreover, these inferences predicted their evaluations of the claims. In all, dislike of self-superiority claims was best accounted for by the perception that the claimant implied a negative view of others (Experiments 4-6) and particularly of the observer (Experiment 7).

Importantly, the take-home message of Experiments 4-7 is *not* that observers condemn negative views of others. Instead, the take-home and novel message is twofold: (a) observers infer a negative view of others (including of themselves) from self-superiority claims that pertain to the claimant, and (b) this inferred claimant view of others (rather than the inferred claimant self-view) in turn predicts observers' evaluations of claims. Ironically,

then, observers' evaluations of claims that ostensibly refer to the *claimant* herself or himself depend on what these claims actually entail for *others*.

### **Dislike of Self-Superiority *Claims* or of Self-Superiority *Beliefs*?**

Observers are of the opinion that most others hold self-superiority beliefs. In particular, observers think that others (a) regard themselves favorably (Kruger & Gilovich, 1999, Study 1b), (b) deem they possess traits that are idiosyncratically (not objectively) desirable (Krueger, 1998, Study 2), and (c) regard themselves more favorably than observers do (Pronin, Lin, & Ross, 2002). Perhaps observers pretend to be tolerant, if not bemused, by others' self-superiority beliefs, but privately denounce them. If the latter is true, it is possible that, in our research, observers reacted negatively to others' self-superiority *beliefs* rather than self-superiority *claims* (i.e., the overt expression of self-superiority beliefs).

We examined, in the conditions of Experiments 4-7, the self-superiority beliefs that participants inferred from the various claims. We subtracted the friendship/studentship ratings that participants thought the claimant would give to other people from the friendship/studentship ratings that participants thought the claimant would give to the self, and we tested whether this difference was significantly greater than zero. We reasoned that a significant effect would signal an inferred self-superiority belief. Consistent with past literature (Krueger, 1998, Study 2; Kruger & Gilovich, 1999, Study 1b; Pronin et al., 2002), participants inferred self-superiority beliefs from *all* claims across the experiments,  $ts > 2.70$ ,  $dfs$  from 15-23,  $ps < .01$ . The mean other-self difference ranged from 1.41 ( $SD = 2.38$ ) in the self-equality condition of Experiment 4 to 5.71 ( $SD = 2.58$ ) in the self-superiority (socially comparative) condition of Experiment 5. Participants, then, attributed self-superiority beliefs not only to the claimant of a self-superiority claim but also to the claimant of a noncomparative positive claim (Experiments 4 and 7), a self-equality claim (Experiments 4



and 6), a temporally comparative self-superiority claim (Experiment 5), and even a subtle or blatant disclaimer of self-superiority (Experiment 7). Observers apparently object to the *overt expression* of self-superiority beliefs (i.e., claims) rather than self-superiority beliefs.

#### **To Claim or not to Claim: Key to the Social Consequences of Self-superiority Beliefs?**

The observation that people dislike self-superiority claims but tolerate self-superiority beliefs contributes to the theoretical and empirical debate on the social consequences of self-superiority beliefs. One view maintains that such beliefs are beneficial to the quality of one's relationships (Taylor & Brown, 1988; Taylor, Lerner, Sherman, Sage, & McDowell, 2003), another view that are harmful to it (Colvin & Block, 1994; Colvin, Block & Funder, 1995), and still a third view that they are beneficial in the short-term but harmful in the long-term (Paulhus, 1998; Robins & Beer, 2001).

The extent to which the holder communicates self-superiority beliefs may determine the harmfulness or profitability of such beliefs. Privately held self-superiority beliefs may add to the relationship quality. Such beliefs will likely contribute to the holder's psychological well-being (e.g., self-esteem, mood, optimism, resilience), which may increase the holder's likeability and potential to respond to others' concerns (Dufner et al., in press; Sedikides et al., 2007). However, self-superiority beliefs are bound to reduce the quality of social relationships, when they are expressed as claims. Others will feel demeaned and devalued.

#### **Are Self-Superiority Claims Evaluated Differently than Other-Superiority Claims?**

According to the correspondence bias literature, observers view others' self-descriptions as reflecting actual dispositions or performances (Gilbert & Jones, 1986). According to the conversational logic literature, observers assume verbal communication to be basically truthful (Grice, 1975). The literatures converge in suggesting that observers would consider both self-descriptions and other-description as valid, unless proven otherwise.

Our results appear to be at odds with these suggestions. Observers generally did not take claims at face value. Participants attributed self-superiority beliefs even to claimants who asserted they were equal to others (Experiment 3, 4, 6) or who issued disclaimers denying they were superior to others (Experiment 7). However, in Experiment 6, participants took at face value the claimant's claims about *another* person even when they were identical to the claimant's claims about him or herself. Evidently, observers evaluate one's *self*-superiority claims differently than one's *other*-superiority claims: whereas they misbelieve the former, they believe the latter. This pattern is consistent with the findings that people expect others to hold self-enhancing beliefs (Kruger & Gilovich, 1999; Pronin et al., 2002).

#### **Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

The reported studies included relatively small sample sizes. With the statistical power that larger samples afford, some marginal results might have turned significant. Also, larger samples would allowed for confident mediational analyses. Arguably, though, the limited statistical power renders the markedly unfavorable responses to self-superiority claims, as well as their association with inferences about the claimant's view of others, even more impressive. In addition, these responses and their correlates proved sufficiently robust to replication. In all, then, we concluded that self-superiority claims backfire. But are there mitigating circumstances? We consider three classes of potential moderators.

**Structural aspects of self-superiority claims.** Falsifiability of a self-superiority claim may affect how well it is received by observers. Evaluations of unfalsifiable claims may be relatively unfavorable, as they invite incredulity (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981). Yet given that the social world often follows a between-subjects than within-subjects logic, observers may often have trouble deciding the extent to which a given claim is unfalsifiable.

Controllability of a self-superiority claim may also elicit differential observer responses. The claimant's value as a friend or student may be considered to be under her/his control. How would observers evaluate self-superiority claims on uncontrollable dimensions? Evidence indicates that evaluations of such claims on a moderately uncontrollable dimension (i.e., declaring to be less at risk than others for health problems) evoke neutral responses (Helweg-Larsen et al., 2002). Yet claims of self-superiority on largely uncontrollable dimensions may spark negative evaluations, as such claims would smack of delusion.

A final structural moderator of evaluations of self-superiority claims is the degree to which the claims are well-reasoned. Arguably, claims that emphasize (likely and desirable) consequences of the claimant's attributes for others may be reacted upon favorably (Areni & Lutz, 1988). Also, claims that involve a higher number of arguments (Calder, Insko, & Yandell, 1974), especially when these claims are of the unfalsifiable variety (Josephs, Giesler, & Silvera, 1994), may be received relatively favorably.

**Contextual considerations.** Context may moderate response favorability to self-superiority claims. For example, a competitive setting (e.g., job interviews) will likely invite a more favorable reaction than a cooperative setting (e.g., conversation among friends; Kruger & Gilovich, 1999, Studies 3-4). Conversely, self-superiority claims issued while an individual is in a leadership position may be looked upon more favorably than those issued from a subordinate or "team member" position; Campbell & Campbell, 2009).

The degree to which the context calls for an immediate self-superiority claim is another relevant consideration. In an experiment by Holtgraves and Srull (1989), participants read a fictional exchange between two target persons, and were then asked to express their opinion of one of them. When a target person made a self-superiority claim in response to a direct question by his or her interactant, this person was seen more favorably. Subsequent research

(Tal-Or, 2010) showed that speakers are perceived unfavorably when they mention their successes without being asked about them by their interactants.

Yet Experiment 4 offers suggestive evidence that people condemn self-superiority claims even when the context calls for them. In most of the reported research (Experiments 1-3 and 5-7; public condition of Experiment 4), we merely instructed participants that the claimant had made the claim while in a group discussion on friendship or studentship. Participants therefore were not informed as to whether the claimant had volunteered the claim spontaneously or responded to a question. In the private condition of Experiment 4, however, participants learned that the claimant had made the claim while completing a questionnaire. Here, participants likely inferred that the claimant responded to a question and still denounced the self-superiority claim. People may be aversive to self-superiority claims even when they are made in contexts that render self-promotion relatively acceptable.

In all studies participants responded to written transcripts of interactions rather than to statements made in ongoing interactions. Would participants have responded as unfavorably to self-superiority claims, if they actually heard claimants making them in live interactions? In principle, it is possible that face-to-face contact with claimants exacerbates or curtails responses to their claims. For example, such contact could either render claims more salient (thus intensifying responding) or, due to information overload, obscure the subtleties of the claims (thus placating responding). It is also possible (and indeed likely) that responding to the two types of claims will not differ. Regardless, the issue warrants empirical attention.

**Observer or target characteristics.** Observer characteristics may also moderate favorability of self-superiority claims. An example involves the degree to which the observer has a vested interest in the topic of those claims. Observers for whom the topic is important will know more about it and be more certain about their knowledge (DeMarree, Petty, &

Brinol, 2007). As such, they may be more attuned to the unfalsifiability or poor reasoning of the claim, especially if the context is unsympathetic to such a claim. Such observers may also be relatively sensitive to the upward social comparison that those claims imply, and thus feel threatened by it (Alicke, 2000), resulting in an antagonistic response.

In addition, self-affirmation may qualify as a moderator. Self-affirmation reduces defensiveness and esteem-seeking behavior and strengthens challenge-oriented behavior (Sherman & Cohen, 2006). It is likely that self-affirmed observers will take no particular offence at self-superiority claims while focusing on possibilities (e.g., forming a broader, and even an instrumental, impression of the claimant).

Moreover, target characteristics are relevant. Narcissism is an example (Miller et al., 2009). Narcissists create an initial favorable impression—due to their extraversion, vitality, and perhaps strategically placed noncomparative positive claims—but this impression quickly deteriorates into an unfavorable one (Paulhus, 1998). This deterioration may be partly to their brazen self-superiority claims—what Tracy, Cheng, Robins, and Trzesniewski (2009) have labeled “hubristic pride.” The deterioration may be steeper among observers for whom the topic of the claims is personally important or who have not been self-affirmed.

### **Coda**

Does it pay off to claim explicitly (and not just believe in) self-superiority? Everything else being equal, it does not. It puts observers off, as they take both personal and social (i.e., other-relevant) offence at the claim. However, in many circumstance not all is equal. We have highlighted several such circumstances (i.e., structural aspects of the claim, contextual considerations, observer or target characteristics) that mitigate the possibly dire interpersonal consequences of self-superiority claims. These implications are worthy of further empirical attention. Research on evaluations of hubris has a promising future.

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